

THE ARACHNID

Chapter One

The Chase

Rodrigo Torres ran through the forest as if his life depended on it—because it did. He was being hunted by a creature that was definitely not from this world, a creature that he knew he had no chance of evading, but he wasn't going to give in without a fight.

Severely out of breath, Rodrigo stopped, hands on his knees of his obese body as he looked behind himself into the forest, looking for any motion between the trees. There was a slight breeze, but he heard and saw nothing, not even the chirping of birds. He grabbed a dried leaf from the forest floor and threw it in the air in an attempt to see which way the breeze was blowing. He continued his sprint in the direction of the breeze since he knew that the creature that chased him had a keen sense of smell, one much more acute than even a dog, and he definitely wanted to be upwind of it.

Rodrigo had no idea how much of a head start he had on the creature, but he knew no matter how much it was, it wouldn't be enough. As he ran over the forest floor littered with fallen

branches and pine needles, his mind raced with thoughts of how he had gotten into this predicament. The money he had received for his lab work from the foreign government seemed like a fortune at the time, but no fortune was worth being killed for. He knew that he alone was the reason that this creature that chased him, now roamed the Earth. He had made a mistake of gargantuan proportions. What had he unleashed on humanity?

The sun had set, but Rodrigo could still see fairly well in the fading light of dusk. He stopped once again to catch his breath and looked and listened behind him—still nothing. Had the creature stopped chasing him? Had it given up? Hope springs eternal, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He was going to keep running as fast and as far as he could.

After a few more minutes of running, Rodrigo stopped again; his obese body demanded it. He was definitely no marathon runner. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he had done any exercise at all, not that it would have mattered in the situation he was in. He doubted that any human, no matter their physical condition, could outrun what was chasing him.

Rodrigo heard the loud buzz of an insect close to his right ear. He instinctively slapped at the side of his face stunning the creature that landed near his feet. Rodrigo peered closely at the stunned insect which was still moving. His heart sank. He knew that the creature that chased him would now know his location.

As he was about to continue his run, he heard a faint sound like the hoofbeats of galloping horses, but this was no horse. He could still see nothing behind him, but terror filled his heart as he realized the creature was getting closer. He continued his run with urgency.

Rodrigo realized that he had no chance of outrunning the beast. His only chance was to hide somehow. But how do you hide from something that had senses unlike any creature, or even any machine, on Earth? His mind raced for an escape as he ran.

The hoofbeats behind him became louder as he spotted a large pond in a clearing ahead. An idea came to him, and he felt in his pants pocket for a ballpoint pen he knew he had used earlier. He ran to the edge of the pond and produced the pen from his pocket. Breathing heavily, Rodrigo removed the ink and ballpoint cartridge from the pen and quickly discarded it. He then removed the end cap leaving the hollow plastic shell of its exterior. Rodrigo looked behind him in the direction of the sound and could hear the distant rustling of tree branches breaking and could see a slight cloud of dust. The creature apparently made no secret of its location as it barreled through the forest breaking branches with loud cracks as its elephant-sized body hurled forward. It had no need for stealth. It didn't need it. It was afraid of nothing.

Grabbing some large rocks from the edge of the pond, Rodrigo urgently filled his pant pockets with the heavy stones and slowly waded into the frigid water. As he moved further into the pond, the water crept up to his neckline, and he looked back one more time in the direction of the cloud and noise. After taking some deep breaths, he placed one end of the pen shell into his mouth, moved deeper into the pond, and slipped underneath the water using the pen as a straw from which he could breathe. The ripples in the pond created by his entrance abated as he stood motionless in the murky water, the only evidence of his existence being the tip of the pen sticking slightly above the waterline.

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The elephant-sized creature erupted from the tree line and moved to the edge of the pond where it stopped. Eight articulated legs stood still on the ground connected to a central carapace. Attached to the top of the carapace, eight snake-like tentacles scanned the surrounding area with methodical precision. The sky had gotten darker, but the eyes at the end of its tentacles could see perfectly since they had the ability to see far into both the infrared and ultraviolet.

Despite its sensory and physical prowess, the creature had but a rudimentary brain, one that operated more on instinct than intelligence. It knew but a simple purpose endowed by its creator—survive, replicate, and conquer at any cost.

Its scanning infrared eyes caught sight of a single point of heat rising from the surface of the pond, one that was easy to discern given the fact that the pond was cool, and the heat source was much warmer. It could see the breath of its prey as it emanated from the tip of the pen. It focused all eight of its sensory tentacles in this direction and took notice of a slight increase in the water temperature under the surface and made out the figure of a human standing still below the surface. It had found its target.

The creature's biologic brain, which had no higher-level thought processes, but was well adapted for determining physical calculations, locked in on its prey. It calculated the density of the disparate fluids of the atmosphere and the water through which its projectile would need to travel to hit its target. It took almost no time to make these calculations and emitted a small projectile at high speed from one of its tentacles. There was a loud crack as the projectile ripped the air with supersonic speed and entered the water. The projectile made an arc in the water as it turned and sliced through the throat of its prey severing both carotid arteries in one fell swoop. A second

projectile, which emanated from another of the creature's tentacles, mercifully severed the spinal cord just below the cranium and ended the life of its prey.

The creature watched as the surface of the pond became red with the blood of its target. The heat signature of its prey's breath disappeared from the surface of the pond as it was no longer breathing. It paused for a few more minutes to make sure its prey was dead, and then the arachnid retreated slowly back into the North Korean forest.